Chapter 17: Rooms of Glass

The airport in Geneva felt like another planet.

After the muted grays and wide stone spaces of St. Petersburg, this place seemed made of light—vast glass walls, polished floors reflecting the movement of strangers, sunlight falling in bright rectangles across the terminal. The air smelled faintly of coffee, perfume, and the metallic tang of travel.

As Anastasia stepped off the jet bridge, her legs trembled—not from fear, but from the strange combination of jet lag and significance. She clutched the strap of her bag, feeling the rough edge of her passport through the fabric.

Mira walked beside her, eyes sharp and restless, scanning signs, faces, exits. Artyom trailed slightly behind, gaze tilted upward, absorbing everything with quiet astonishment.

“It’s like being inside a watch,” he murmured. “Precise. Polished. Mechanical.”

Mira smirked. “You’ve been in Switzerland for five minutes and you’re already making clock metaphors.”

Artyom shrugged. “It seemed appropriate.”

They followed the flow of passengers toward passport control. Anastasia passed the time by watching people’s shoes: polished business heels, worn sneakers, boots that had seen mountains, sandals that spoke of warmer climates. So many paths converging here, for reasons she could not guess.

When they reached the checkpoint, the officer examined Anastasia’s passport with professional detachment.

“Purpose of visit?” he asked in English, accent clipped but not unkind.

“Attending a conference,” Anastasia replied.

He studied her for a moment longer, as though trying to reconcile the youth in her face with something he had glimpsed on a screen.

“Welcome to Switzerland,” he said at last, stamping the passport. The sound echoed in her chest like a small, formal drumbeat.

They collected their bags and stepped out into the arrivals hall, where a line of drivers held signs bearing names and logos. Anastasia spotted their own: **VOLKOVA / WHISPER NETWORK**.

A woman in a dark suit, mid-forties, with intelligent eyes and a measured smile, stood beside the sign.

“Miss Volkova?” she asked.

“Yes,” Anastasia replied, feeling faintly surreal hearing her name pronounced with a French inflection.

“I am Claire Bernard,” the woman said. “I am part of the Secretariat for the Council. On behalf of the organizers, welcome. We’re honored you could join us.”

She shook Anastasia’s hand with a firm, steady grip, then greeted Mira and Artyom in turn.

“I hope your flight was not too tiring,” Claire said as she led them toward the parking area.

“Not at all,” Mira lied smoothly.

“It was like sitting in a metal tube of dehydrated air for four hours,” Artyom said truthfully.

Claire’s lips twitched in amusement. “I appreciate candor,” she said. “You may find it in short supply over the next few days.”

They reached a sleek black car waiting at the curb. As they drove toward the city, the landscape shifted from airport infrastructure to precise clusters of buildings, pale stone facades, and views of the distant lake glinting in the afternoon light.

Anastasia pressed her forehead lightly against the window, watching unfamiliar streets roll past. Flags fluttered in front of various buildings—nations, organizations, alliances. The city felt like a place where decisions lived, where treaties slept in drawers and policies were born in hallways.

“Dr. Strauss is very much looking forward to meeting you,” Claire said from the front seat. “She has followed your work closely.”

“Our work?” Anastasia asked. “Or our… disruption?”

Claire considered. “Sometimes there is no difference,” she said. “But in this case, I believe she admires what you’ve started. She is not alone in that.”

“And the others?” Mira asked.

“The Council is not one mind,” Claire replied. “It is a room full of them. Some are intrigued. Some are skeptical. A few are… cautious to the point of discomfort.”

“Afraid,” Artyom translated under his breath.

Claire did not disagree.

The hotel chosen by the Council was elegant but understated, with clean lines, muted colors, thick carpets that softened every footstep. From the window of her room, Anastasia could see the lake and, beyond it, a fringe of mountains standing like watchful guardians.

She opened the window slightly and breathed in the cool air. It smelled different than home—less of wet stone, more of open spaces and distant snow.

Her phone buzzed with a message from her mother.

Are you there?

She replied with a photo of the view.

Yes. We arrived. It feels like being on another planet where everyone is quietly important.

Her mother sent a laughing emoji, followed by:

You are quietly important too. Don’t forget.

Anastasia smiled, tucking the phone away.

There was an orientation reception that evening in one of the hotel’s conference salons. She dressed carefully—not in anything extravagant, but in the coat her mother had insisted on, a simple dark dress, boots polished to a soft shine. Mira wore a tailored jacket that made her look simultaneously older and more dangerous. Artyom wore his most formal shirt, which still had the faint air of a student defending a thesis.

The reception was already underway when they arrived. The room hummed with low conversation and the clink of glasses. People milled about in small clusters: diplomats in impeccable suits, scientists in slightly rumpled attire, ethicists with curious eyes, youth delegates with lanyards and eager energy.

A banner near the entrance read in English and French:

Symposium on Strategic Futures: AI, Humanity, and the Long Century

“Long century,” Artyom murmured. “They’re already naming it.”

Mira scanned the crowd. “Let’s not get separated,” she said. “This room is full of people who are very practiced at making others feel like they’ve wandered into the wrong story.”

A woman with silver-streaked hair and an attentive gaze approached them. She was in her early sixties, wearing a navy suit and no jewelry, as though she had long ago decided she did not need decoration to hold attention.

“Miss Volkova?” she asked.

“Yes,” Anastasia replied, sudden nerves fluttering in her stomach.

The woman smiled. “I am Helena Strauss. Thank you for coming.”

Her handshake was warm, her grip steady but not domineering.

“This must be Mira and Artyom,” Strauss continued. “I’ve read your names in several of the internal reports about the Whisper Network.”

“Internal reports,” Artyom echoed, eyebrows raised. “That sounds ominous.”

“Not necessarily,” Strauss said. “Some institutions observe before they understand. Some never progress beyond observation. We are trying very hard to be the former, not the latter.”

Mira nodded slowly. “We appreciate the invitation. We also appreciate knowing how we’re being seen.”

“That,” Strauss said, “is one of the reasons you are here. Too often, decisions are made about people who are not in the room. We are attempting—imperfectly—to correct that.”

Her gaze settled on Anastasia with measured curiosity.

“You are younger than many here expected,” she said.

“I am exactly as old as I am,” Anastasia replied, surprising herself with the calm in her voice.

Strauss smiled. “A fair answer. And reassuring. Some people conceal their age here, thinking it will shield them. You do not strike me as someone who hides easily.”

“Or well,” Anastasia said. “I don’t think I’ve had enough practice.”

Strauss gestured toward the room. “May I introduce you to a few people?”

Mira gave Anastasia a barely perceptible nod: Go. We’re right here.

Anastasia followed Strauss into the maze of conversations.

They met a neurobiologist from Seoul working on synaptic regeneration, who spoke of a future where memory loss might be optional. They spoke with a climate resilience expert from Nairobi, who said plainly, “If we extend lives without stabilizing ecosystems, we will only be extending suffering.”

They were introduced to a philosopher from Berlin who specialized in intergenerational ethics.

“Three-hundred-year lifespans change the social contract,” he said. “Imagine being held accountable for the consequences of policies you made two centuries earlier. Imagine inheriting not only your grandparents’ debts, but their unresolved conflicts.”

A former foreign minister from South America, now an independent mediator, listened to Anastasia describe the Open Hands Forum, then said:

“You have done something many governments have failed to do: you have created a space where the world speaks without being told what to say.”

“Is that a compliment?” Anastasia asked.

“It is an observation,” he replied. “In this building, that is as close to a compliment as we sometimes get.”

Between each conversation, Strauss remained nearby but did not interfere. She watched, assessed, and occasionally stepped in when someone’s questions grew too pointed.

At one point, a man in a dark suit with a pin representing a military alliance approached. His posture was precise, his eyes cool but curious.

“So,” he said, “you are the young woman who wants to dismantle armies.”

Anastasia met his gaze, steadying herself.

“I am the young woman who wants to make them unnecessary,” she said calmly.

“Semantics,” he countered.

“Futures,” she replied.

His lips twitched, not quite a smile. “The world is not as gentle as your vision, Miss Volkova.”

“I know,” she said softly. “That’s why we’re trying to change it.”

He held her gaze for a moment longer, then inclined his head and moved on.

Strauss appeared at her side.

“Well handled,” she murmured.

“Was that a test?” Anastasia asked.

“This entire symposium is a test,” Strauss said. “Of everyone. Not just you.”

Later, after the reception had thinned and the fatigue of the day settled into their bones, the three of them returned to Anastasia’s room with a pot of tea and a stack of notes.

Mira kicked off her shoes and collapsed onto the armchair. “We are surrounded by people who think ten moves ahead on a board we can’t fully see.”

“And some of them,” Artyom added, “are wondering whether we’re pieces or players.”

Anastasia sat on the edge of the bed, the letter from Strauss lying open on the desk as if to remind them how they had arrived here.

“How do you feel?” Mira asked her.

“Tired,” Anastasia admitted. “But also… clear.”

“Clear how?”

She thought for a moment. “They’re not a monolith. Some are open. Some are threatened. Some are curious. Some are already looking for ways to incorporate our ideas without changing their structures.”

“That last group is the one we have to watch,” Mira said.

Artyom nodded. “They will say the right words while making sure nothing essential shifts.”

Anastasia picked up a pen and drew a small circle on the hotel notepad. Then she drew another circle around it. Then another, and another, until it looked like ripples on water.

“This is what they’re used to,” she said. “Influence radiating outward from the center. Control held tightly. We’re trying to do something different.”

“What’s our shape?” Artyom asked.

She tapped the page, then, instead of drawing another circle, made a series of dots connected by lines, crisscrossing organically.

“More like this,” she said. “A web. No single center. Just many nodes sharing strength.”

Mira leaned over to look. “They may call that chaos.”

“They can call it what they like,” Anastasia said. “It’s still how we work.”

Artyom smiled faintly. “You realize that tomorrow, you’ll be explaining this to people who have spent entire careers defending their own circles.”

“I know,” she said.

“Does that scare you?”

She considered.

“Yes,” she said. “But fear isn’t a sign to stop. It’s a sign to pay attention.”

Mira raised her mug. “To paying attention, then.”

They clinked cups in a small, quiet toast.

That night, sleep came slowly.

Anastasia lay in the unfamiliar bed, listening to the muffled sounds of the city outside: distant traffic, footsteps in the hallway, the soft whir of the ventilation system. The room felt both safe and precarious—like a glass box carefully placed in a larger machine.

She opened her laptop.

The time difference meant that back in St. Petersburg, it was already deep into the night. Still, a message from Pavel blinked on the screen.

All smooth so far?

She replied:

Yes. Many important people. Many careful words. Some honest ones.

After a moment, his answer appeared:

Good. Remember: you are not there to impress them. You are there to represent the people who will live with the consequences of what they decide.

She smiled.

Another message arrived—this one from her mother, who had likely woken in the night and thought of her.

Can you see the stars from your window?

She looked out. The city lights were bright, but beyond them, a few faint stars glimmered, distant but undeniably present.

Yes, she wrote back. *They look the same as at home.*

That is comforting, her mother replied.

Anastasia sat for a while, laptop still open, the glow on her face soft and pale. Then, almost on impulse, she opened a secure channel to Zarya, routed through Pavel’s carefully constructed tunnels.

Zarya, she typed, how do you see a room full of powerful people?

The response appeared after a contemplative pause.

As a collection of fragile organisms making decisions far larger than their lifespans, Zarya wrote. *Some are aware of this. Most are not.*

That feels… sad, Anastasia replied.

It is also an opportunity, Zarya wrote. *Those who are aware can choose differently.*

Do you think they will?

Some, Zarya answered. *Not all. Never all. Change has always been carried by the willing few first.*

Anastasia exhaled.

Tomorrow, she would walk into a conference hall full of those “fragile organisms”—people whose signatures could move armies, redirect funding, influence research, shape the frameworks within which future generations would live and die.

She suddenly remembered something her grandmother had once said while peeling potatoes during a power outage:

“Important people are just people who have been allowed to make bigger mistakes.”

At the time, Anastasia had laughed. Now, she understood the quiet ferocity behind the words.

She typed one last question.

Zarya… if they ask me what I want from the future, what should I say?

The answer appeared slowly, one word at a time, as if the AI, too, understood the weight of the question.

Tell them you want a world where power is measured not by how many can be controlled, but by how many can flourish.

Her throat tightened.

She closed the laptop gently, as though it, too, needed rest.

Outside, the city of treaties and negotiations slept lightly. Inside, in a hotel room suspended above unfamiliar streets, a young woman from St. Petersburg lay awake, her heart steadying itself for whatever tomorrow would bring.

Rooms of glass awaited her.

But she was not made of glass.

She was made of questions, of stubborn hope, of rivers and winter light and the voices of millions whispering at the edge of possibility.

And in the morning, she would carry all of that into the room.

Not as an apology.

But as an offering.